

Mason honored for dedicated work with youth

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When representatives from West Las Vegas Arts Center were seeking someone to work with young people, they turned to actor/director Walter Mason, realizing they didn't have the funds to pay him his worth.

Without hesitation, Mason accepted.

Since then the former Broadway and Shakespearean performer has directed youth productions that have toured local elementary schools, and taught theater arts to at-risk kids during the center's summer arts program.

Tonight local performers will take the stage at the West Las Vegas Library to honor Mason for his long career in the performing arts and his contributions to the Las Vegas community.

Performers include Norma Miller, the "Queen of Swing" who danced at Harlem, N.Y.'s, Savoy Ballroom during its heyday, and local jazz groups the Cunninghams and the Jimmy Wilkens Quintet. Also taking the stage will be area singers and dancers, and students who have studied with Mason.

A taped introduction by Bill Cosby will begin the program.

Speakers will include longtime Las Vegas and former singer Bob Bailey, Carol Foster, principal of Madison Elementary School where Mason has taken youth theater performances, and Las Vegas resident actor /director Zakes Mokae, who has appeared on Broadway, in film and television.

"This is to honor him as a friend ... for his commitment to the cultural betterment to the people of the West Las Vegas area," said Iris Newman, cultural activities specialist at the West Las Vegas Arts Center.

"He's one of our treasures, our icons."

Mason has been working with youth in the West Las Vegas area for several years, bringing his nearly 50 years of theater experience with him.

Additionally, the Ira Aldridge Theatre Co., a local theater company Mason founded in 1993, gave the Las Vegas Valley outstanding performances of James Baldwin's 1955 play "The Amen Corner" and August Wilson's "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," a play about racial exploitation and self-hatred reflected in the 1920s music industry.

At the West Las Vegas Arts Center's Performing Arts and Visual Arts Camp, Mason has helped build self-esteem and discipline, said Marcia Robinson, director of the West Las Vegas Arts Center.

"The kids go out of here just glowing because of Mr. Mason, his talents, his visions," she said. "He's been around the world. He's seen a lot of kids. He knows where our kids should be."

Robinson added, "His expertise really can't be measured."

Originally from Detroit, Mason has worked with such prominent directors and actors as Lloyd Richards and James Earl Jones.

He has portrayed Othello in Shakespeare's tragedy of the same name, and Caliban in "The Tempest" in several productions throughout the country.

He directed the "The Amen Corner" in London's West End, and appeared in the 1964 film "Black Like Me." Other theatrical credits include the Broadway and national tour of "A Raisin in the Sun."

From 1968-79 Mason was the production manager and drama coach for singer Sammy Davis Jr. In 1986 he became the entertainment director at the Las Vegas Hilton, a position from which he retired in 1999.

Working with local youth, Mason said, is a joy.

Though many of the kids won't pursue the performing arts as a career, he said that the esteem and belief in themselves is the tremendous gain.

"They come from backgrounds that are not necessarily conducive to this kind of enlightenment," he said.

"Consequently they have negative beliefs in themselves. And they just need to be sparked."

Growing up in Detroit, Mason said that he, too, was encouraged by those around him to follow through with his ambitions and dreams.

"The young people have really great talent," Mason said. "You just have to get it out of them."

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